DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 465 972 CS 511 157

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TITLE At the Mercy of Sadistic Cats and Megalomaniacal Dogs: Dilbert as a Reflection of and Vehicle for Organizational Cynicism.
PUB DATE 2002-04-00
NOTE 19p.
PUB TYPE Opinion Papers (120)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Comics (Publications); *Employee Attitudes; Higher Education; Integrity; Job Performance; *Organizational Communication; *Organizational Effectiveness; *Work Ethic
IDENTIFIERS *Cynicism; *Dilbert (Comic Strip)

ABSTRACT

Organizational cynicism, a recent entry into the study of organizational communication, explains the causes and consequences of employees' lack of trust in their organizations. Organizational cynicism exists on three levels: the cognitive belief in the organization's lack of integrity, the feeling of negative emotions toward that organization, and the behavioral expression of that belief and emotion. Recent research has shown correlations between organizational cynicism and measures of organizational effectiveness. In addition, cynical employees are less likely to perform organizational citizenship behaviors (OCBs). Scott Adams' comic strip "Dilbert" exhibits both the characteristics of organizational cynics and their effects on the workplace. For example, in "Dilbert" one of the most easily recognized elements of integrity and honesty is exposed as one that leads to failure. In addition, like the majority of American workers Dilbert feels pressured to engage in unethical behaviors. This pressure only increases his levels of cynicism. Finally, in "Dilbert," employees consistently and consciously bypass opportunities to help the organization by engaging in OCBs. (Contains 39 references.) (PM)

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ED 465 972

At the Mercy of Sadistic Cats and Megalomaniacal Dogs:

Dilbert as a Reflection of and Vehicle for Organizational Cynicism

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At the Mercy of Sadistic Cats and Megalomaniacal Dogs:

Dilbert as a Reflection of and Vehicle for Organizational Cynicism

Despite a brief increase in employee loyalty to their organizations and public confidence in American institutions following the September 11, 2002, attacks, cynicism continues to increase in American workplaces (Williams, 2001; PR Newswire, 2001). As the American business environment transforms from a capital based economy to one based on information processes and experiences dramatic up and down turns, organizational members are increasingly skeptical about their employers' motives and actions. In fact, one study found that 39% of employees felt that their managers would take advantage of them, if given the chance; 49% thought that management keep its true reasons for making decisions from those most affected by them, and 59% felt they did not who they could trust (Mirvis & Kantor, 1992).

Organizational cynicism, a recent entry into the study of organizational communication, explains the causes and consequences of employees' lack of trust in their organizations (Dean, Brandes, & Dharwadkar, 1998; Abraham, 2000; Atwater et al, 2000). This essay will examine the causes and consequences of organizational cynicism, and look to the *Dilbert* comic strip and its related artifacts to illustrate these constructs.

Organizational Cynicism

Organizational cynicism codified the general discontent prevalent among employees in the American workplace. This section of the paper will discuss the delineation of organizational cynicism and the consequences faced by organizations whose members suffer from it.

Dean, Brandes and Dharwadkar (1998) define organizational cynicism based on three components: The belief that the organization lacks integrity, negative affect towards the organization, and a tendency to act on those beliefs by enacting critical and disparaging behaviors toward the organization. Specifically, "organizational cynics believe that the practices of their organization betray a lack of such principles as fairness, honesty, and sincerity" (p. 346). Cynics also believe that management forgoes these core principles, and betray their stakeholders, to advance their own self-interest.

This belief that the organization is unworthy of trust quickly leads to an affective, as well as cognitive, response in cynical employees. As Dean, Brandes and Dharwadkar (1998) explain, " that cynicism is *felt* as well as *thought*" (p. 346, emphasis is original). In fact, organizational cynicism can engender "powerful emotions including contempt, anger, distress, and shame" (Abraham, 2000, np). Mistrust soon metastases into a stronger, and more virulent, negative affect toward the organization.

Employees enact these emotions by expressing criticism and contempt for the organization. Dean, Brandes and Dharwadkar (1998) posit that cynics engage in a wide variety of behavior forms, ranging from "explicit statements about the lack of honesty, sincerity, and so on, on the part of the organization...[to] certain types of nonverbal behavior...[that] includes 'knowing' looks and rolling eyes, as well as the smirks and sneers by which cynics (and Cynics) have long been known" (p. 346). Thus, organizational cynicism exists on three levels—the cognitive belief in the organization's lack of integrity, the feeling of negative emotions toward that organization, and the behavioral expression of that belief and emotion.

The consequences of organizational cynicism go beyond sly looks and rolling eyes. Recent research has shown correlations between organizational cynicism and measures of organizational effectiveness. For instance, Abraham (2000) found that organizational cynicism had a significant negative effect on job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and alienation. The more cynical employees were, the less likely they were to be satisfied with their positions and loyal to their employing organizations. They were also more likely to estranged from their work and abilities. Atwater et al (2000) found that cynical supervisors were less likely to change their behavior in response to upward feedback from employees than their less cynical cohorts. This study indicates, "organizations should assess the degree of cynicism that exists prior to implementing a feedback intervention" to prevent their efforts from failing (np).

Mixed data exist on the effect of organizational cynicism on organizational citizenship behaviors (OCBs), which Andersson and Bateman (1997) describe as "constructive or cooperative gestures that are neither demanded by an employee's role nor compensated by the organization's formal reward system" (p. 455). OCBs include such activities as working extra hours, helping on an unattractive project, and productively utilizing idle time at work. Andersson and Bateman (1997) found that cynical employees were less likely to take part in OCBs. Abraham (2000), on the other hand, found no direct correlation between the two constructs. Instead, she found an indirect effect, namely, cynical employees are more likely to experience alienation. Alienated employees, then, are less likely to perform OCBs. Thus, whether directly or

indirectly, organizational cynicism has a negative effect the execution of these actions, which help the organization.

Considering the breadth of employee cynicism, it is not surprising that popular culture reflects both the causes and the consequences of this phenomenon. The following sections will examine *Dilbert* in general and how the comic strips and related artifacts illustrate some of the consequences of this concept.

The *Dilbert* Phenomenon

Late in 2000, the number of comic strips syndicated in two thousand newspapers grew by one. *Dilbert*, the newest addition to this group, joined comic stalwarts *Garfield*, *Blondie*, *For Better or for Worse*, and reprints of *Peanuts* as the only currently syndicated strips to reach this number of outlets. Scott Adams' strip about an engineer and his coworkers reached this pinnacle only eleven years after its 1989 debut.

Arguably one of the more "funny looking" strips on the market today, Scott Adams' *Dilbert* nonetheless has been very successful. *Dilbert* is one of the most successful syndicated strips ever (dilbert.com, 2002). Of Adams' 22 *Dilbert* books, two titles, *The Dilbert Principle* and *Dogbert's Top Secret Management Handbook,* were #1 *New York Times* bestsellers. To date, over 10 million copies of these books have been sold (*AsiaPulse*, 2001). The strip's website, dilbert.com, was a first for a syndicated strip in 1995 and is currently the most read syndicated comic online (dilbert.com, 2002). Despite claims that the character has "past his prime" (abcnews.com, 2001, np), Adams claims that readership is up from previous years since his strip about an embattled engineer, his co-workers, family, and pets "is hitting closer to home for professionals"

during the current economic downturn (Skidmore, 2002, np). Even during the economic boom of the late nineties, *Dilbert* still boasted over 150 million readers (*Time*, 1997).

In order to understand the strip's popularity, a brief discussion of *Dilbert's* character's and situations is in order. Its title character falls into the Frye's (1957) ironic hero. Dilbert is the stereotypical computer nerd. In its early years, the strip "focused on Dilbert's inability to get a date and often depicted his spherical pet, Dogbert, outwitting him" (Leonhardt, 1996, p. 46). Later strips, however, shifted their focus to highlight Dilbert's workplace foibles. Dilbert, and his coworkers, Wally and Alice, serve under a supervisor who cannot tell the difference between a laptop computer and an Etch-A-Sketch (Adams, 1996b), they waste untold hours in pointless meetings planning the agendas for other meetings (Levy, 1996), and work on projects that, literally, drain their life force until they become damp rags (Adams, 1996c).

The character with the greatest single effect on Dilbert and his coworkers' cynicism is their unnamed supervisor. This character's distinguishing physical characteristic is his hair, which only grows in two pointy tufts above each ear. As well as giving him a vaguely satanic appearance, this hairstyle provides him with his moniker--'The Pointy-Haired Boss.' The Pointy-Haired Boss exemplifies incompetence and a lack of technological knowledge in the workplace. For instance, Adams (1996d) shows a strip where the boss reac[illegible] Dilbert's memo claiming his project was delayed "due to the ongoing bumbling of a clueless, pointy- haired individual." The Boss' only recommendation involved changing "due to" to "facilitated by," making the report grammatically incorrect. Yet, he does stay current on all the latest business trends. Understanding them, however, is beyond his abilities.

Adding to the human characters' frustration, anthropomorphic animals often outrank them in the organizational hierarchy at work. Dogbert, and the similarly shaped feline director of human resources Catbert, appear in many strips set in Dilbert, Wally, and Alice's organization. Dogbert periodically enters Dilbert's organization and makes life more difficult for its members. Most of the time he does this for money; a few times, like the time he took over the organization's exercise program for engineers, he has implemented policies that humiliate employees for his own amusement. In a typical example, Dogbert buys the organization and when the employees ask his plans for the company, he says he plans to ""buy proven technology and hire contract employees. You'll be gophers for the contractors until you resign in disgust and humiliation" (Adams, 1997c, p. 22). Luckily for the strip, but perhaps unluckily for the characters, this never transpires and the three continue to work for the same supervisor in the same organization.

Another character who enjoys inflicting pain on co-workers is Catbert. This character took the position of Human Resources Director at Dilbert's company because he enjoys causing people to suffer. *The Dilbert Zone* explains, "Catbert is a typical cat, in the sense that he looks cute but he doesn't care if you live or die." Not only does he not care about employees, he consciously plans ways to torture them. For instance, Catbert, like all cats, enjoys toying with his prey before finishing them off. In several strips he toys with employees before downsizing them. For instance, in his first action as HR director, Catbert told a soon-to-be-downsized employee, "We need to talk, Paul. But first I'm going to bat your head around and scratch you" (Adams, 1997c, p. 24).

These characters, and the situations in which they find themselves, will be discussed in more detail in the following section of this paper. After introducing the characters and scenarios prevalent in *Dilbert*, a close analysis of the text indicates that it provides a clear illustration of the causes and effects of organizational cynicism.

Dilbert as a Reflection of Organizational Cynicism

Several researchers discuss the prevalence of cynicism in American organizations (Dean, Brandes and Dharwadkar, 1998; Feldman, 2000; Melymuka, 1997). Feldman (2000) even titled his examination of the effects of employee cynicism on career choices "The Dilbert Syndrome" and software designer Ed Yourdon uses the "Inverse Dilbert Correlation Factor" to determine the cynicism levels of employees; "You look at how many Dilbert cartoons are on the bulletin board to get a sense of how jaded and cynical the project team has become" (Melymuka, 1997, np). With these practices in mind, it should not be surprising that *Dilbert* exhibits both the characteristics of organizational cynics and their effects on the workplace. Specifically, this section will examine how the comic strip illustrates Dilbert and his coworker's belief that their organization lacks integrity and how their cynicism prevents them from engaging in OCBs.

Lack of Honesty in Dilbert's Organization

A common perception about organizations states that ethics and profitability are mutually exclusive concepts (Rue & Byers, 1997). Although this view is untrue, it is widespread. Adams comments on it when he says, "ethics and business don't have to be naturally opposed, I suppose. But they often end up that way because it turns out that you wouldn't sell very much otherwise" (quoted in Cheng & Dennehy, 1996, p. 211).

Honesty as a value may be threatened by this perception, as people assume that telling the truth about a product will keep customers from wanting it. Dilbert and his colleagues express this perception of organizational members by showing situations where their organization avoids honesty at all costs, leading to increased levels of cynicism among the employees.

The Pointy-Haired Boss does not believe in telling the truth in internal communication. In one strip, he puts Dilbert in charge of obtaining ISO 9000 certification, saying, "I don't know what it, [sic] is but it looks great on brochures" (Adams, 1996g, p. 197). When Dilbert explains that ISO 9000 certification requires organizations to follow consistent procedures, the Boss responds, "That's us. We always lie on our brochures" (p. 197). The Pointy-Haired Boss admitted dishonesty with a smile, implying that telling the truth on brochures would be ineffective. Everyone should lie when designing them.

In another strip, the Pointy-Haired Boss applies for the Millard Bullrush Quality Award and tells Dilbert to explain how he used total quality methods on his most recent project. However, this project did not include total quality procedures, causing Dilbert to protest, "I'd have to lie" (Adams, 1996g, p. 203). The Boss replies, "Sadly, Millard passed away before he could invent the Millard Bullrush 'Honesty' award" (p. 203). This strip exposes how little importance the Boss places on honesty and integrity. He thinks he can either tell the truth or further the organization's goals, not both. In this case, he chooses to apply for an award rather than adhere to ethical standards. What is most interesting about this example is the lack of concern the Boss has about lying. He does not appear to experience any guilt or concern about being discovered. The futility of

honesty in organizational life has become such an ingrained part of his psyche that he does not reflect on it.

Catbert also expresses contempt for honesty by telling a job applicant during an interview, "We were done with the part you had to answer honestly" (Adams, 1999a, p. 98). Learning that information changed the applicant's answer to the questions. Although the strip does not indicate if the applicant got the position for which he was applying, Catbert's comment illustrates a lack of interest in the truth. If he does not want accurate information to make his own decision, Catbert can see no use for honesty at all. He apparently agrees with Dogbert, who says, "I've noticed that honesty doesn't mix well with anything" (Adams, 1999a, p. 65).

Adams (1998a) expresses a different view of honesty when telling readers how to bring humor to their jobs. He recommends, "You can make an ordinary situation funny by substituting honesty, where, ordinarily, people would lie or avoid saying anything. Honesty in social situations is so rare that it automatically qualifies as bizarre" (p. 229). This type of honesty is also unusual in organizational settings. In one strip, Dilbert accompanies a sales representative to a client meeting. The client, sensing an opportunity, asks Dilbert if the product is defect free, as the sales representative claims. Dilbert replies:

> Well... Yes, that's true I mean...basically true...technically true...sort of... No-o-o!! It's a lie! All of the bugs were reclassified as security features to make the ship date!! And we both think you could be attractive if you'd just do <u>something</u> with your hair. (Adams, 1996g, p. 172; emphasis in original)

The inappropriateness of Dilbert's comments brings humor to the strip, and likely prevented the sale. However, the interesting element of this strip lies in Dilbert's reaction to his response—he is embarrassed when he tells the truth. Not only does he see honesty as futile, ethical standards have reversed and he sees lying as honorable and honesty as shameful.

Employees' expectations of honesty in organizations are rapidly decreasing. One commonality of the previous examples is that the characters seem surprised that anyone would even attempt honesty. Truth telling also leads to negative ends, such as not receiving an award or closing a sale. In *Dilbert*, one of the most easily recognized elements of integrity, honesty, is exposed as one that leads to failure. Adams highlights the futility of this attribute when he states, "The whole concept of telling the truth really doesn't work in the business world" (Cheng & Dennehy, 1996, p. 211).

Organizational Pressure to Engage in Unethical Behavior

Although the press and public attribute unethical actions to organizations as a whole, individual organizational members make the decisions and take the actions that create the situations exposed. In many organizations, individual unethical behavior is more prevalent than observers like to believe. Posner and Schmidt (1984) found that 72% of employees feel pressure to take actions they view as unethical and 41% yield to that pressure. Like the majority of American workers, Dilbert feels pressured to engage in unethical behaviors. This pressure only increases his levels of cynicism.

The Pointy-Haired Boss has no compunctions against requiring his employees to engage in unethical behavior, as can be seen in the following examples. When preparing for the ISO 9000 audit, he "divided our preparation tasks into two groups:

Unethical and unproductive" (Adams, 1998b, p. 22). In this case, Dilbert and Wally were conditioned to expect unscrupulous tasks to the point that not only did they not question his orders, but they also fought over the unethical list. The most glaring example of the Boss requiring unethical, and in this case illegal, behavior occurred when he hired North Elbonian contractors to help with Dilbert's classified military project. Dilbert did protest against this action, saying, "North Elbonia is an evil totalitarian regime. My project will create top secret military technology to use against them... I could be executed for treason" (Adams, 1998b, p. 212) for allowing them to see the technology. However, the Pointy-Haired Boss weighed the ethical issues against the money saved by hiring the North Elbonians, who were willing to work for free, and privileged company profit over national security. The Pointy-Haired Boss, as so many Americans think their supervisors do, put his own needs above basic ethical standards. In this case, the North Elbonians did steal the technology, however, Tina the Tech Writer's intentionally inaccurate instructions prevented them from using it. Here, one immoral action canceled out another.

This example not only shows the pressure employees face to behave in ways they know are wrong, but also illustrates their unwillingness to protest. After Dilbert's arguments were rejected, none of the employees involved with the North Elbonians called the FBI or any other government agency to complain about the situation. Dilbert, to his credit, did talk to the company lawyer, who offered to help pull the lever at his execution (Adams, 1998b, p.212). Yet, no one alerted the government, even when the North Elbonians began to build a gigantic laser to use against the country. Conrad (1994) notes that once one employee succumbs to unethical actions, others find it more

difficult to resist, a point illustrated often in *Dilbert*. Hence, when ethics have been marginalized in an organization, they are difficult to reclaim.

Although the Pointy-Haired Boss commonly pressures employees to act unethically, he is not the only manager in the organization guilty of that behavior. In one series of strips, Dilbert gets temporarily transferred to Sales, where his training session warns of potential pressures for unethical behavior:

> Welcome to sales training. As you know, our company makes overpriced, inferior products. We try to compensate by setting high sales quotas. We don't ask you to act illegally, but it's pretty much the only way to reach quota. Okay, that's it for training. Any questions. (Adams, 1995, p. 7)

This monologue was the entire training program. Although few organizations are as open with their pressure to act unethically or to maximize company profits at the expense of their integrity, Conrad (1994) comments that "aspects of organizational operations that on the surface seem to be ethically neutral can create pressures to engage in unethical activities" (p. 330). This policy appears to fall into that category.

In light of the covert and overt pressure employees receive to bend the rules and engage in unethical behavior, it should come as no surprise that many employees succumb and act dishonorably. However, they also lose respect for their organization, causing employees to experience organizational cynicism. The next section will examine this cynicism and its effects on Dilbert and his co-workers.

Organizational Cynicism has a Negative Effect on OCBs

Dilbert characters experience high levels of organizational cynicism, and, as a result, are unwilling to engage in OCBs. In one strip, Wally faces the opportunity to

perform an OCB when he finds an error in the company's latest software package. Upon discovering the problem, Wally thinks, "I could alert the development team and work many hours of unpaid overtime to fix it...or I could surf over to my online brokerage service and buy stock in the competition" (Adams, 1998b, p. 96). Not only did Wally opt for the online brokerage service, but when Dilbert and Alice learned he was working through lunch, they also bought their competitor's stock. Instead of acting as good organizational citizens, they decided to expend their efforts for their own gain. This example also shows the futility of the employees' ethical systems. Instead of doing what "is accepted as 'good' or 'right'...in a particular setting" (Schermerhorn, Hunt, and Osborn, 1997, p. 13), they opt for personal gain.

In a similar, but less lucrative situation, the Pointy-Haired Boss tells Dilbert to prepare important information by 1 p.m. As noon approaches, Dilbert thinks, "If I do a shoddy job, I can finish this and still make it to lunch" (Adams, 1999a, p. 99)! At lunch, he confesses his decision, saying, "Today I traded my work ethic for a banana" (p. 99). Wally admits he has also given up performing OCBs by saying, "I ate that banana years ago" (p. 99). This example is interesting not only for showing employees' decision-making processes, but also for implying how wide-spread organizational cynicism is in Dilbert's, and by extension, the typical American organization.

The final example of employees' eschewal of OCBs is more blatant than the first two. As well as not expending extra effort to aid the organization, the employees intentionally damage it for their own financial gain. The Pointy- Haired Boss announces a program to pay employees ten dollars for every bug they find and fix in the software. Dilbert and Alice cheer the new policy and Wally exclaims, "I'm gonna write me a new

minivan this afternoon" (Adams, 1997c, p. 126). In a related strip, Dilbert tells Ratbert, "The company pays me ten dollars for every bug I fix in my code, Ratbert. I want you to do your little rat dance on my keyboard so I have lots of bugs to fix" (p, 126). In these strips, Dilbert, Alice, and Wally put their own interests above those of the organization. They not only ignore OCBs, which include performing extra work for no extra pay, but instead write bugs that need to be fixed, thus costing the organization and enriching themselves. They have reached levels of cynicism that preclude OCBs.

In *Dilbert*, employees consistently and consciously bypass opportunities to help the organization by engaging in OCBs. They believe their organization lacks integrity and see no reason to expend extra effort to aid it. Employees' ethical systems may once have considered it "right" to sublimate their own needs to those of the organization, however, after spending time in organizations that they feel lack integrity, they are no longer willing to make those sacrifices. Instead, they take actions designed to further their own ends at the expense of the organization.

Conclusion

Despite a supposedly rebounding economy, a renewed sense of national unity, and organizational attempts to motivate and retain employees, cynicism toward American institutions continues to rise, especially among the workforce. In their seminal article, Dean, Brandes and Dharwadkar (1998) delineate the defining characteristics of the construct organizational cynicism. Later researchers (Abraham, 2000; Atwater et al, 2000; Andersson & Bateman, 1997) more closely examine the workplace consequences of widespread employee cynicism. Not surprisingly, the Dilbert comic strip illustrates both the characteristics and the consequences of this construct.

However, Feldman (2000) takes this analysis a step further by arguing that the comic strip, fantastic as it is, should be seen as a harbinger levels of cynicism to come. He claims, "'Dilbert' is the 'Ghost of Christmas Future' if we do not start changing the ways we manage careers in organizations soon" (p. 1299).

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Corporate Source:	Publication Date: April 6, 2002

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